

# Getting off the clock winds down stress

## Advice Line

by Dr. Betty Phillips



The stress monster loves all kinds of time-keepers. Clocks and schedules regulate our lives, ostensibly for the better, but actually creating time pressures that destroy peace and relaxation. There is never enough time. From the first ring of the alarm clock in the morning, the clock rules our lives. Surrounded and monitored by time-keepers and deadlines, time ends up as a ticking time bomb reaching even into the apparent sanctuaries of our homes and bedrooms.

"To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven." (Ecclesiastes 3:1) We used to live according to Natural Time, choosing our actions ourselves, eating when hungry and sleeping when tired. Although every recorded civilization developed devices to measure time, many of these instruments were unreliable. Self-determination, therefore, played a much bigger role in the lives of individuals. Do you know why historical duels and other events were held at dawn? Not just to enjoy the morning air, but because daybreak was easily identifiable as a time to schedule events. Business and moral reasons were used to increase pressures for time accountability. Ben Franklin stated that "Time is money," and religion informed us that "Idle

hands are the devil's tools." Time management gurus advocate tight scheduling throughout the day and night. People are expected to think faster, work faster, read, write and talk faster; in short, to speed through life. To survive, we wake up with coffee, sustain ourselves with high sugar snacks and fast food, then wind down at night with alcohol and couch potato TV time. Multitasking actually decreases our efficiency.

We can, however, improve productivity and efficiency and also manage stress effectively. Overscheduling has now reached the point of diminishing returns, creating burnout and lowered productivity. And this has been proven scientifically with brain research. Our culture is so over-identified with the work ethic that few of us will actually follow de-stressing recommendations unless they can be documented by hard science. It turns out that we need to manage energy, not time, for high performance and life satisfaction. You may not have heard about the body's ultradian rhythms which regulate natural fluctuations of exertion and recovery. It turns out that the body and mind actually need a 15 to 20 minute break after every 90 to 120 minutes of intense focus. During periods of high activity the body and mind deplete available stores of energetic compounds which allow us to focus and work clearly and alertly. Interestingly enough, our brains and



manage time for your own enjoyment and psychological renewal. We find ourselves cramming so much into every moment that we leave little time to actually experience our lives. As a result, we feel disconnected, trapped and powerless on the treadmill of life. As we race toward the future, someday we will realize that the future is always elusive as each "now" moment is experienced only a prelude to the "next." We need to learn how to experience the present without pressure or anxiety about staying on schedule. You can consult Time-

Shifting, Stephan Rechtschaffen, Main Street Books, 1997, on this topic as well as writings by Eckhart Tolle. My website also contains relevant articles about the perils of multitasking and burnout as well as positive approaches to self-care and happiness.

We are presently recapturing some of the wisdom of the ancients. Ovid, a Roman poet born 43 BC, wrote: "A field that has rested gives a bountiful crop." We all need and deserve rest and rejuvenation.

our bodies do not actually take a break when we choose down-time. Key parts of the brain are actually working 30 percent harder during these unfocused periods, processing and making sense of the information generated during work time and regenerating neurotransmitters. You've also heard about the "Eureka factor" when new insights appear during periods of dreaming or day-dreaming. The Power of Full Engagement, James Loehr and Tony Schwartz, Free Press, 2004, is oriented to workplace success but is also the best general reference available to explain this approach. The point is that science advocates regular breaks, social time, rejuvenating amusements, exercise, naps, healthy snacks, and so forth, interspersed throughout your high-performance, high-quality day.

I also advocate learning how to

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